

# HOW TO ORGANISE OPEN BRANCH MEETINGS

**D**ISCUSSIONS at the Central Propaganda Department have shown that Open Branch Meetings, when they are properly organised and planned, play an extremely important part in securing growth, increased influence and consolidation of membership and local forces.

At such meetings and in the course of their organisation, individual members of the Party receive considerable political education; they are given the feeling of belonging to an organisation which is not only strong in influence nationally, but also locally; and they are therefore made more conscious of the part they play as individuals in the development of the Party. The use of local speakers, their training through experience in opening discussion or taking part in it, and the popularisation of local members, are also of very real importance and value to the future of the Party.

Open Branch Meetings cannot take the place of the large public meeting, which has the character of a demonstration. But they can give better results than many a small "public" meeting, which gets a poor response, both from

the Party members and from the public.

Because of war conditions, with long hours of work, difficult transport, the black-out, etc., it is specially important to consider the best possible way to attract both our own comrades and the public (particularly the local Labour movement) to our meetings. Reports show that—apart from big rallies with prominent speakers—the best results are got from Open Branch Meetings, and in agreement with the Centre Organisation Department, we therefore strongly urge branches to consider holding *regular, carefully prepared, well-advertised Open Branch Meetings in 1943.*

## WHAT IS AN OPEN BRANCH MEETING?

An Open Branch Meeting is one which is planned in every respect as if it were a meeting with a national speaker. It is planned well ahead, together with others in a series.

The first point in the plan is to give the meeting a political content which will make everyone attending it feel that it has been really worth while, and has given them a fresh political understanding and stimulus to political activity; and to make everyone who hears about it sorry they were not there.

This does not mean that you must have a national speaker to open the discussion. But it means:

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## FIRST, THE CHOICE OF SUBJECT

The meeting must have a purpose. It is not possible to lay down subjects from the Centre. Sometimes it will be what is called a national question, sometimes a local one. The great point is that it should be something that at the time is rousing interest in the locality—and that may be the Red Army, North Africa, Lady Astor, a day-nursery, production drive at a local factory or pit, campaign for affiliation to the Labour Party, etc., etc. And the aim of the meeting should be to explain the Party's attitude on that question and stimulate activity on it (not by Party members only, but by the other sections of the Labour movement and the public generally).

## SECOND, THE CHOICE OF SPEAKER

The really essential thing is to select a speaker who will seriously prepare the opening speech. None of us is an expert on everything. All of us have to make careful preparations if we are going to present, not only a well-informed, but a stimulating and helpful opening to a discussion. Therefore the speaker selected must give time to preparation; the notes for the speech should be talked over with other comrades; especially the practical suggestions to be put should be discussed with the branch committee. If this is done, comrades and visitors will get something valuable out of the meeting.

It may very well be that, for the subject chosen, a non-Party speaker would do the best job—for example, a Labour Councillor on the day-nursery or British Restaurant campaign.

When the subject and speaker are selected, then to the campaign to make the meeting a success.

A successful meeting is campaigned for. It is advertised. News items are sent to the Press about it. Every step is taken to get every individual member to bring one or two friends to it. Care is taken to invite and to bring along members and representatives of local Labour organisations.

## HOW AN OPEN BRANCH MEETING SHOULD BE ORGANISED

*(NOTE : It may not be possible for every branch to carry out all the proposals made here owing to various causes, such as smallness of branch, etc., but larger branches should carry out every step.)*

### (a) PLAN

Meetings to be held monthly.

Plan to cover a minimum of three meetings. A six-months' period is still better.

Work out subjects, speakers and aims.

Submit to branch committee, then to groups for endorsement by vote involving pledge to give personal backing to ensure success by bringing people, advertising, etc., etc.

Print plan as a programme of such-and-such branch for the period decided upon. Print on small card to go in pocket.

### (b) PUBLICITY AND CAMPAIGN

The backbone of the campaign and publicity for the meeting is the personal work of individual members of the branch actively talking about the meeting to everyone for at least three weeks before it takes place.

Every member of the groups should undertake to bring someone to the meeting.

There is no substitute for this personal work. Every member will carry out this personal activity if the leading comrades explain at

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the group meetings the importance of the subject and what it is hoped will result from the meeting in the form of action.

Every local organisation, Shop Steward Committee, Production Committee should be sent a copy of the programme for future meetings, with a covering letter hoping to see their members or representatives. Personal visits should be made to as many working-class organisation representatives as possible, to invite them along. Local representative people who are interested should be asked to assist by distributing invitations or programmes.

When asking people to attend always stress that we will welcome expressions of opinion, in addition to inviting questions, especially if they belong to other working-class organisations.

Issue invitation tickets. A standard style can be printed, with the title for each meeting changed as required. Call the meetings just branch meetings, not "open."

Issue leaflets for wider distribution. Have a short introduction on the leaflet, explaining that the meetings are open to anyone and everyone interested in the defeat of Fascism and desirous of assisting local organisations, people, and the Party in carrying out their duties to achieve victory with maximum speed. See that these leaflets are distributed where they will have effect, *i.e.* in the factories, housing estates, etc.

A few posters, done by members, can be put up locally, outside members' houses, on hoardings, in shop windows, club, factory Trade Union, Labour, Co-op, branch and premises notice boards.

Advertise in the local Press. If you can manage it, contract for 13 or 26 weeks—you get reduced rates, better positions, more good will: it really is well worth it.

See that letters on the subject, which need not actually mention the meeting provided there is also an advertisement at the same time, are sent in to the local papers.

Aim to feed news items to the Press relating in some way to the subject, or to the name of the local speaker, etc. If you give the local speaker's name and address, there is always a better chance of a news item getting in. After the meeting, send in a report, mentioning the next one. Always invite the Press along, even if they don't come—it keeps them informed.

Slides at the local cinema are useful.

A postcard pinned up amongst the "For sale" and "Wanted" cards at the local newsagents will always be read. *But remember: nothing can replace the personal work of the individual member.*

One branch had great success by putting on all adverts "Admission by card"—so that visitors produced their Trade Union, Co-op, or Labour Party card.

### (c) THE MEETING

Decorate the room with plenty of posters.

For fifteen minutes before the advertised time of starting, play some music on a gramophone or radio.

Details of the next meeting should be *prominently* displayed at a spot where everyone must notice them as they come in and as they go out.

Have a good display of literature, making a special show of material dealing with the subject under discussion. If the meeting is to be very large, more than one stall is required. The chairman should not tell the audience "we have our literature stall at the back there." He should say, "You can read more about what so-and-so has been saying in an inexpensive pamphlet or booklet costing only 2d. We also have many other

interesting pamphlets and books by experts for sale," etc., etc. In other words, don't use the word "literature" all the time.

Start promptly on time. Finish on time, remembering that some people will have to catch buses.

Announce the date, time and place, the subject and speaker of the next meeting. Offer leaflets, programmes, invitation tickets to the audience.

Hand round cards on which people interested can write their names and addresses. They can be kept informed of future events, or they may be desirous of joining the Party. Never omit to ask the audience to help to make the next meeting a success by bringing friends.

After the discussion put a few suggestions as to what steps can be taken to get the policy that has been advocated carried out. Ask for further suggestions—if there are members of other organisations present, you are almost bound to get useful ideas. Suggestions can take the form of resolutions from local organisations, deputations to M.P.'s, Borough Council, etc., letters to the press, etc.

#### (d) THE DISCUSSION

The speaker should open the discussion with a statement that can last from 15 to 30 minutes. His job is not to make what is erroneously called a "propaganda speech." He should state a case, a reasoned argument, giving plenty of facts and local examples. He may not be able to cover all the ground in the time, but sometimes this is an advantage.

A few comrades should be given the responsibility for speaking in the discussion. They can, if necessary, put forward one of the points which the speaker, owing to lack of time, was unable to deal with. It is far better, however, if they give some personal example or local illustration which goes to prove the case made by the speaker. On no account should they speak for more than five minutes.

When questions are put, the speaker should reply briefly with a reasoned argument. If someone puts a view which is not in agreement with the policy expressed, don't leap at them as if they are enemies. You will never encourage people to discuss and scrutinise if they fear to be held up to ridicule because they cannot express themselves clearly.

The British working class is paying far more attention to-day to the political and social problems which face this country and we can, with determination and careful planning, draw many thousands of workers into activity through such Open Branch Meetings.

We must do our utmost, in association with other sections of the movement, to work out a basis for the activities of the whole movement in every area, so that the Labour movement throughout the country becomes an active political force.